

KHOST IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR: FIRST CITY IN AFGHANISTAN FALLS TO JALALUDIN HAQANNI, THE PAKISTANI ISI AND THE INADEQUACIES OF AERIAL RESUPPLY

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During the Soviet-Afghan War, a long-term goal of the Mujahideen was the capture and retention of a city in Afghanistan that they could proclaim as the capital of free Afghanistan. Positive benefits could follow such a success: international recognition as the rightful government of Afghanistan, increased foreign aid from countries not already engaged in providing military and economic support, extension of Geneva Convention rights to captive Mujahideen, and access to international courts. Such a city could provide the site and services for a transition government. Throughout the Soviet-Afghan War (24 December 1979-15 February 1989), this possibility only happened once. In August 1988, after Soviet troops evacuated the provincial capital of Konduz (population 30,000) as part of the Soviet troop withdrawal, Mujahideen forces managed to slip into the city before the Afghan government had full control of it. Afghan government forces retook the city after several days of fighting.

Konduz was a target of opportunity which the Mujahideen lacked the strength to retain. The provincial capital of Khost was a more-tempting and important target. It appeared to be low-hanging fruit but this fruit proved to be a prickly pear cactus and several Mujahideen attacks on Khost were decisively defeated over the years. Khost was firmly under Afghan government control. The problem was that the terrain around Khost and the roads leading to Khost were not under Afghan government control. Khost was isolated and could only be supplied by air. This was its situation for most of the Soviet-Afghan War. The only time that Khost was supplied by ground was during the Soviet-Afghan Operation Magistral.

Operation Magistral¹

The Mujahideen closed the road from Gardez to Khost in 1981. This was the main line of communication (LOC) to Khost and, although there was another long, convoluted road (also blocked) to Khost, the Khost garrison was looking much like the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan's (DRA) version of Dien Bien Phu. Consequently, the Khost garrison and city were primarily supplied by an air bridge.

In February 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev announced the planned withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan. It was clear that the Soviets had to either force the roads open or abandon Khost—giving the Mujahideen a major victory and a city that they could then declare

their capital of “Free Afghanistan.” The Gardez-Khost road had to be opened, but the first threat to Khost was in the south. The Mujahideen maintained a major supply and armaments complex in the caves of Zhawar on the road to the Pakistani supply depots in Miram Shah. In September 1985, the Armed Forces of the DRA attempted to seize Zhawar and failed. In February 1986, the DRA and Soviet 40th Army launched a 57-day campaign that finally captured Zhawar. They only held it for five hours, destroyed what they could, and withdrew. After the campaign for the caves of Zhawar was complete, the Soviets withdrew from Khost. But, by the fall of 1987, the situation was becoming critical for the beleaguered DRA 25th Infantry Division holding Khost. Air transport could only get in at night. The Mujahideen of Jalaluddin Haqani were back in force in a rebuilt Zhawar. Local Mujahideen had also improved the defenses blocking the entry to the Gardez-Khost road. Food was running short in Khost for both the 15,000 civilians and the military garrison. Insuring Khost’s security was a primary strategic objective for the Soviet Union and DRA and the task fell on the 40th Army Commander, General-Lieutenant Boris Gromov. His first mission was seizing the Satakandow pass, which rises abruptly some 800 meters from the plains of Gardez.

Although General Gromov had some five and two-thirds divisions in the 40th Army, the bulk of the force was involved in securing the cities, airfields, garrisons, and main roads of Afghanistan. He could not pull entire units out for this operation. Instead, he pulled pieces of 40th Army and DRA units from across northern and eastern Afghanistan. Gromov mustered approximately 24,000 soldiers and a significant amount of army, division, and regimental artillery. He concentrated this force outside of Gardez beginning on 21 November 1987. From 21–27 November, while negotiations were conducted with Jalaluddin Haqani (through letters) and tribal elders, the artillery and division and regimental command posts dug in while battalion, regiment, and division commanders conducted reconnaissance and planning.

On 1 December, Soviet paratroopers and Afghan commandos, under the personal command of General-Major Sergei Grachev, took the Satakandow Pass.² Then the attack stopped. This was a political event as much as a military fight. The government of the DRA convened a Loya Jirga [grand council] of local tribal leaders to negotiate again for the safe passage of trucks carrying food, fuel, and other peaceful cargo. The DRA Senior Minister for Tribal Affairs, Sulayman Laeq, representing President Najibullah, presided over the two-week session with the leaders of the dominant Zadran tribe. The protracted negotiations again failed. On 16 December, the 40th Army and Afghan forces again resumed the offensive. They advanced along the main axes through the Satakandow Pass and the road through the Saroti Pass. The air and artillery coordinators positioned on the high ground pummeled Mujahideen resistance as the force negotiated the hairpin turns and repaired the road sections that the Mujahideen had destroyed. The Mujahideen withdrew higher up into the lightly-forested mountains. They found concealment in the evergreen trees, brush, and scrub. An Afghan Commando Brigade and a Soviet battalion conducted an air assault landing near Khost and linked up with the beleaguered

25th Afghan Division. In a spectacular assault, the 345th Separate Airborne Regiment captured and destroyed the Mujahideen main base at Sarani. The Mujahideen withdrew. Soviet engineers removed mines and obstacles.

On New Year's Eve, the convoys began rolling from Gardez, eventually delivering 24,000 tons of food, fuel, ammunition, and other supplies to Khost. By the end of the second week of January, the fighting was done and the Soviets held the opposition supply and ammunition dumps. The Soviets held the road until the end of January. They destroyed or evacuated tons of captured ammunition as well as four captured tanks, ten captured BTRs, and all type of weapons. They then transferred control of the Khost Highway to the armed forces of the DRA and withdrew. Within a week, the Mujahideen once again controlled the road. Within a month, the Mujahideen were restocking their supply and ammunition dumps.³

Defense of Khost after the Soviet Withdrawal

The government presence in Khost was always contentious. Jalaluddin Haqqani's force of Mujahideen brought supplies through the Pakistani border town of Miram Shah, maintained large depots in the caves of Zhawar and controlled the mountains and highways leading from Khost to Gardez.⁴ The tribes surrounding Khost were also hostile. Usually, the garrison could purchase food, gasoline and diesel from the local populace. Much of this came from Pakistan. The Khost garrison could only be supplied with weapons, ammunition and certain fuels by air. The airfield runway was only long enough to accommodate the AN-26 dual-engine, turboprop transport and passenger plane. The Soviet-manufactured "CURL" has a five-man crew and can carry 40 passengers or 12,000 pounds. Designed for austere conditions, its main role was tactical transport and airborne drops. By 1989-1990, the bulk of the Afghan government AN-26s were lost or grounded for repair. The supply of Soviet cargo parachutes were in increasingly short supply. The airfield was frequently shelled during take-offs and landings, so air support for the garrison was not stationed on the airfield, but came from other bases in Afghanistan. Response time was usually one hour and 20 minutes, so artillery was the main fire support for the garrison. The regime's R-300 [SCUD] battalion also fired long-range missile strikes against areas when opposition forces assembled for attacks on Khost.⁵

President Najibullah, Minister of Defense Tanai and Minister of the Interior Watanjar all had tribal ties to the area. Loss of Khost would be an affront to the leadership. General Farukh commanded the 25th Infantry Division. He was a graduate of a Russian military school and spoke excellent Russian. Often he would broadcast his radio reports in Russian, knowing that it would slow down the Mujahideen intercept efforts.⁶ After the Soviet withdrawal, Farukh commanded some 4,400 personnel, 160 artillery pieces and mortars, 36 tanks (of which 26 were operable), and 20 personnel carriers. His division was at 18 percent of TO&E strength. Most of General Farukh's officers belonged to the Khalqi communist faction. A Border Guards brigade and KHAD units in Khost were at 16-20 percent of TO&E strength. The armed forces of the army, ministry of interior and ministry

of internal affairs had 30 different units involved in the defense of Khost. The average strength of these units fell between 30-50 and 80-100 personnel. Their heavy armaments such as tanks, personnel carriers and artillery were worn-out and could not be replaced due to the requirement to fly them in. Thus, out of 18 122mm M-30 howitzers, four were unserviceable and the majority of the rest could not fire further than three-four kilometers due to excessive wear. [Maximum range is normally 11 kilometers].⁷

The soldiers' situation was none too good. The garrison had to conserve scarce artillery ammunition. The opposition seemed to have ammunition to spare, particularly 107mm and 122mm rockets. There were three key rocket-firing positions that the opposition used against the airfield. Attempts to defeat rocket launchers with artillery fire usually ended with the opposition firing multiple rounds for every government round fired. Bunkers and dug-in firing positions were not strong or plentiful enough. Damaged arms and equipment could not be evacuated for repairs or fixed on site. There were no appreciable reserves when the garrison occupied its fighting positions. Once night fell, officers and soldiers often abandoned their night positions and went into the city to spend the night. The 25th Division commander held a night-time alert and discovered that there were no officers present in many of his units as well as those of the border guards, Sarandoy and State Security.⁸

The Fall of Khost

The 31 March 1991 attack on Khost was planned by the Pakistani ISI. The leading moderate Ahmadzai tribal chief in Paktia was Haji Naim. He was a member of the commanders' shura and the head of the Ahmadzai tribal shura. The ISI provided arms and ammunition to his followers, but assigned a supporting attack role to him. Jalaluddin Haqqani's and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's forces were to play the key combat role in the take down of Khost. The ISI sent about 3,000 Afghans against approximately the same amount of defenders. Pakistani Special Services Group (SSG) commandos were part of the operation and Pakistani artillery and communications specialists were attached to the Mujahideen assault groups. Other Pakistani C&C teams were positioned around Khost to coordinate artillery fire.⁹ Pakistani artillery units, reportedly deployed earlier at the siege of Jalalabad, supposedly also provided artillery fire here.

The attack began in the morning with attacks from multiple directions. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's forces attacked to seize the airport. Hekmatyar's forces failed, but Haji Naim's forces then attacked and seized the airport, despite heavy casualties. The initial attack on the city was repulsed by the 59th Commando Brigade and tribal militia from the Khost region. By mid-afternoon, however, the attack resumed and the Ahmadzai tribal warriors fought their way into the city. Haqqani's Mujahideen followed the warriors into the city and captured the garrison command post. This turned the tide of the battle. Some 2,500 government soldiers surrendered. Hundreds more escaped overland to Gardez. Reportedly, some 500 government soldiers were killed and another 400 of them were wounded. A deputy defense minister and two KHAD

generals were reportedly among the prisoners. Opposition losses were put at 160 KIA, 121 of which were Ahmadzai tribesmen. The ISI took control of the captured heavy weapons. There were 25 tanks (12 working) and over 50 artillery pieces.¹⁰ They turned these over to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The ISI-planned and sponsored loose alliance of Haqqani's and Hekmatyar's Mujahideen and Ahmadzai tribesmen fell apart after the fighting. Haqqani's push, once the Ahmadzai had gained a foothold in the city, clearly won the battle. Yet Hekmatyar's force, which failed to capture the airport and played only a minor role in the fighting, ended up with the garrison radio station and the bulk of the heavy weapons, in violation of the pre-battle agreements. The ISI prevented Haqqani from recovering this material. Subsequently, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, General Durrani of the ISI and Qazi Hussein Ahmad, leader of Pakistan's Jamiatk-I Islami, made well-publicized visits to Khost, promoting the Pakistani role and support of Hekmatyar to a growingly nationalistic Afghan public.¹¹

The formation of a Mujahideen government in Khost in opposition to the Najibullah government in Kabul was not feasible. Pakistan had openly showed its hand as an over-reaching neighbor in the overthrow of Khost and the Mujahideen had proven incapable of uniting to establish a new government in the garrison town. Instead the Pashtun tribesmen and Mujahideen pillaged Khost. The *jihad* [holy war] was over. Khost was the final blow to the idealism that fired the Soviet-Afghan War. The first blow was the failed siege of Jalalabad. Jalalabad broadcast the failure of the Mujahideen to unite effectively and transition from quarreling guerrilla bands to a unified conventional force dedicated to the overthrow of an atheist government. The second blow was the Tanai mutiny and his alliance with Hekmatyar. If the Khalqi communists and Hizb-i Islami Islamic fundamentalist faction could ally, but Hekmatyar could not ally with other jihadist factions, the war was now clearly just a struggle for power. Khost had fallen, but it was not a victory for religion or moral choice. Rather, it showed that the factions could not unite for the good of Afghanistan.¹²

Post script

From 20 June to the end of July 1991, Ahmed Shah Masood conducted a campaign that captured the town of Khwaja Ghar, the large town of Khanabad, Zeebak on the Pakistan border and Eshkashem on the Amu Darya River across from the Soviet Union. Massood made no attempts to establish a Mujahideen government in any of these towns. Masood now controlled 300 miles of Afghanistan's border with the USSR. The Soviets requested border negotiations and Masood agreed-but insisted on bilateral negotiations that excluded the Najibullah regime. The Soviets accepted the conditions, hardly an encouraging sign of steadfast Soviet support to Najibullah despite their annual continued support of three billion dollars to his regime. During the negotiations, the Soviets accepted Masood's request that the remaining Soviet border-control post in Eshkashem, established following the 1978 Saur revolution, be moved back across the Amu Darya onto Soviet territory.¹³

¹ This section excerpted by author from Lester W. Grau, The Battle for Hill 3234: Last Ditch Defense in the Mountains Of Afghanistan, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 24:217–231, 2011.

² For an account of the fight for this crucial pass, see LTC A. N. Shishkov, “An Airborne Battalion seizes the Satukandau Pass” in Lester W. Grau, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan*, Fort Leavenworth: Foreign Military Studies Office, 1995, 61-66.

³ For a Mujahideen view of operations see General Gulzarak Zadran, Lieutenant Omar, Mawlawi Nezammudin Haqani, and Mawlawi Abdul-Rahman; ‘The Defense against the Soviet Operation “Magistral”’ in Ali Ahmad Jalali, and Lester W. Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War*, Quantico: United States Marine Corps Studies, 1998, 165–173.

⁴ For an examination of the Zhawar cave complex and the major battles fought there, see Ali A. Jalali and Lester W. Grau, “The Campaign for the Caves: The Battles for Zhawar in the Soviet-Afghan War”, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Volume 14, September 2001, Number . 3.

<http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/zshawar/zshawar.htm>

⁵ Makhmut A. Gareev, *Moya poslednyaya voyna [My last war]*, Moscow: Insan, 1996, 252.

⁶ Russian-speaking Afghans also led to press reports of Soviet forces garrisoning Jalalabad and Khost in defiance of the Soviet withdrawal treaty.

⁷ Ibid, 253-258.

⁸ Ibid, 258-260.

⁹ Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts and the Failures of Great Powers*. New York: Public Affairs, 2011, 431-432.

¹⁰ Ibid, 432.

¹¹ Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation & Collapse in the International System*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, 255.

¹² Ibid, 255-256.

¹³ Tomsen, 433.